

Russia will not step in to save Serbian bullies

by Konstantin George

A key component of the British attempt to sabotage, delay, or otherwise contain U.S.-led decisive military actions against Serbian forces in Bosnia has been to promote the view that decisive western military action would somehow provoke a Russian counter-action. At the official level, the Russian government has nurtured this view in words. In reality, the notion of a Russian "intervention" is pure bluff. Any western figure who believes otherwise has been wrongly advised by people who, at the very least, are woefully ignorant of the array of options in domestic and international relations confronting Russia.

A first insight into the actual Russian policy can be gained through a discussion given to *EIR* on July 26 by a senior Russian commentator who has close links to the Russian General Staff. Concerning what to expect from Russia in the Balkans, he said: "You will hear a lot of anti-western noises, and anti-western sentiments will surely increase domestically, and that is, admittedly not unimportant. But, on the ground, the Russians will do nothing. They will make a lot of noise, but nothing more than that. Forget about our sending arms to the Serbs; there is no interest in antagonizing the countries bordering Serbia, through which deliveries would have to come. Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Albania would all not allow it and want good relations with the West."

Russia and the Muslim world

This line of argument can be followed upward to the global-strategic level. At the first level, Serbia means nothing to Russia in comparison to Russia's paramount interest in maintaining and developing good relations with the Muslim world. So-called "Pan-Orthodox" sentimentalities, mostly a

myth anyway, dissolve in an instant when confronted with the vital imperatives of Russian State strategic interests.

For example, since the break-up of the Soviet Union, one of the main Eurasian pillars of Russian foreign policy has been building a strategic axis with Iran. This reality is familiar to western readers through the Russian sale of civilian nuclear reactors and conventional military arms, such as the three Kilo-class submarines and modern aircraft to Iran. The intense collaboration with Iran has been key to Russia's ability to maintain stable, pro-Russian governments in all the newly independent Central Asian republics, which in every case are ruled by Presidents who were the Communist Party leaders in the last years of the U.S.S.R. Iran has also helped Russia cool down significantly the war in Tajikistan.

Iran is also one of the leading political and military supporters of Bosnia in its war against Serbian aggression. In short, were Russia to actively intervene on the Serbian side, it would lose Iran's friendship, and open up the potential for instability in Central Asia. Not to mention that the basis for a future "comeback" of Russian influence in the Middle East as a whole would be squandered.

Beyond Iran is the question of Russia's relation to the Arab Muslim world. The leadership in Moscow has no doubt what a fiasco it would have in this area were it to intervene for Serbia. On Aug. 1, as quoted in the Aug. 2 issue of the French paper *Le Figaro*, the foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) told the Russian ambassador: "You risk losing many of your friends and your interests in the Arab-Islamic world, if you continue to support the Serbian aggressors."

This is no mere question of prestige and influence, but of economic life and death. There is a definite link between

Russian relations to the Muslim world and the very survival of the Russian huge military-industrial complex. Along with the rest of Russian industry, the crucial military-industrial complex has been severely damaged by economic shock therapy applied under the prodding of the International Monetary Fund. In contrast to the more compliant attitude taken concerning civilian industry, the Russia leadership has acted to contain the damage to the military-industrial complex through a transitional policy of increasing arms sales abroad, thus establishing a "life-line" stream of foreign exchange income for the hard-pressed sector.

With the exception of China, the main arms sales contracts signed to date have been with Islamic nations, and it is with these that the prospects for large future increases lie. The most important Russian customers include Iran, the U.A.E., and Malaysia. Iran and Malaysia have been in the forefront of organizing within the Muslim world to break the arms embargo against Bosnia.

It must also be recalled that Russia is already in hot water in the Muslim world because of the manner in which its armed forces have operated against the Muslim civilian population of Chechnya. The threat to its position in Muslim world opinion was an unspoken, but decisive consideration behind the Russian policy shift to a negotiated settlement of the Chechen conflict.

Russia and the Balkans

The recognition that Russia will not intervene on behalf of the Serbs should the West make the threatened air strikes, was prominently featured in the leading French daily, *Le Monde*, on Aug. 2, in an article titled: "Ex-Yugoslavia Is Not a Priority for Moscow." Its author, *Le Monde* Moscow correspondent Sophie Shihab, wrote that Russia's "capacity to pull strings in the region is not convincing to the Russian political class itself." She began by citing a commentary in the Russian government daily *Izvestia*, which mocked Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev's contention that it was his diplomacy that averted a Serb attack on the Bosnian enclave of Gorazde. *Izvestia* stressed that the attack was averted by the NATO ultimatum, adding: "The sole path toward peace consists, today, in using force . . . everyone understands this, save Moscow."

Shihab then cited identical commentaries that appeared in the Russian dailies *Sevodnya* and *Kommersant*, making the point that the "historic influence" of Russia in the Balkans is a "myth." They stressed that Russia, by having played the "Serbian card," had thrown away the real opportunity to exert influence that Europe had offered it, to play a "mediating role among the Slavic peoples of the Balkans."

Shihab observed that there has been a distinct shift in the Russia media during 1995, away from past strident support of the Serbs. Overall, the Russian elites are worried over the crisis-ridden domestic situation. Preoccupied with "their own well-being," they are in no mood or position to

engage in Balkan adventures. Rather, the Russians have played the Serbian card to extract concessions from the West on broader issues, such as securing a revision in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) agreement, allowing more Russian troops and equipment to deploy in the southern regions of Russia.

On the same day, coverage in the other leading French daily, *Le Figaro*, expressed the same view, citing an editorial in *Sevodnya*, "The Balkans Have Always Brought Only Misfortune to Russia," and then one Givi Gumbaridze, director of the "Reform Foundation" in Russia, saying that Russia would never seriously engage in an intervention in former Yugoslavia, as this would "only unveil the weakness" of Russia as a "great power."

The coverage in the two widely read Paris newspapers has contributed to help puncture the myth of a Russian intervention at a time when French President Chirac has toughened France's position in favor of attacking the Serbian aggressors.

The Balkans, first of all, are not confined to the territory of former Yugoslavia. Within the Balkan peninsula to the east and south of Serbia lie Bulgaria and Greece, and this region is of far more urgent concern to Russia.

The concern begins with the question of pipeline routes for Russian oil and gas. To bypass Turkey, Russia is constructing a pipeline route through Romania and Bulgaria down to the Greek port of Alexandroupolis on the north shore of the Aegean in the Greek province of Thrace. In a reversion of sorts to its 19th-century policy, Russia's main interest in a "Slavic brother" friendly state in the Balkans centers on Bulgaria, formerly a Soviet satellite nation, and not Serbia.

One should recall the model of 1875-77, when Serbia was at war with the Turks. Then as now, there was extensive Russian aid to the Serbs in the form of "volunteers" and arms, but the Russian State abstained from intervening, and allowed the Serbs to be defeated. When the Russian State did step in, in 1877, it was on behalf of Bulgaria. Russian armies dealt decisive defeats to the Turks, and the Russian-dictated Treaty of San Stefano in 1877, created a "Greater Bulgaria" under Russian tutelage. Incidentally, this same treaty, even though the Turks had been militarily swept from the Balkans, awarded nothing to Serbia. San Stefano was a short-lived result, reversed by the Congress of Berlin in 1878, but it revealed the true contours of Russian Balkans policy, behind the volumes of rhetoric for the "Serbian cause."

In the present period, the physical signs of a Russian-Bulgarian orientation may not arise too often, but they are there. Most notable is Russia's diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Macedonia, enacted in August 1992, not coincidentally, while President Boris Yeltsin was visiting Bulgaria. It was Russia, operating in tandem with Bulgaria, and not any of the western nations, which became the first great power to recognize the Republic of Macedonia as an independent State.